

Central Intelligence Agency



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MOSCOW, LEBANON, AND THE PEACE PROCESS

Summary

We believe that the Soviets will continue to bolster Syria's opposition to the Israeli-Lebanese withdrawal agreement. They will maintain a generous flow of military equipment; accompany this with political, propaganda, and logistics support; and exploit and exacerbate Lebanese tensions in an effort to demonstrate that the US-backed agreement cannot lead to peace. [redacted]

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Moscow and Damascus may believe they would benefit from limited conflict confined to Lebanon--such as stepped-up artillery exchanges and Palestinian raids on Israeli positions--even though these could escalate into broader Israeli-Syrian conflict. The Soviets probably would prefer to avoid a wider conflict which almost certainly would result in Syria's defeat. Yet, they appear willing to accept the risk because the successful implementation of the withdrawal agreement would greatly enhance the prospects of President Reagan's plan for a Middle East peace settlement. Moscow may be counting on Washington's ability to restrain Israel, Tel Aviv's reluctance to

This paper was prepared by [redacted] the Foreign Policy Issues Branch, Policy Analysis Division, Office of Soviet Analysis. Comments and queries may be directed to the Chief, Policy Analysis Division [redacted]

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engage Soviet units in Syria, and Syrian President Assad's desire to avoid an all-out war. [REDACTED]

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Moscow also is running the risk of being perceived as the spoiler in Lebanon by the moderate Arab camp. Its willingness to do so probably reflects its recognition that for all its efforts to co-opt the moderate Arabs' position on a peace settlement, its ties with the radical Arab states are the key to its influence in the Middle East. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets may be prepared to offer alternative peace proposals--for example, UN-sponsored talks--in an effort to protect themselves against the possibility that Syria, for reasons of its own, might accept the US withdrawal plan. Should Syria decide to disengage from Lebanon and cooperate in the broader peace process, Moscow would have little choice but to acquiesce. [REDACTED]

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THE LEBANON WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT

Moscow's View of Lebanon

1. Lebanon has become the testing ground for Moscow's reliability to its radical Arab clients and its ability to block US policy in the Middle East. The USSR's credibility was severely damaged by its ineffective response to the Israeli invasion of June 1982 and its subsequent exclusion from the pursuit of a solution. Syria, the key to Soviet presence and influence in the Middle East, has vital interests at stake in Lebanon, as do Moscow's Palestinian clients. The repeated Soviet condemnations of the introduction of US military forces to Beirut reflect Moscow's view that their presence demonstrates Washington's determination to assert its primacy in the region-- and to challenge Soviet interests in the Third World. [REDACTED]

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2. Furthermore, the outcome of the US-backed Lebanese-Israeli agreement on withdrawal of foreign forces has assumed crucial significance for broader Middle East peace talks. Moscow presumably considers the initial agreement a setback. The US ability to "deliver" Israel on the issue of withdrawal has strengthened Washington's credibility, once again raised doubts about Soviet relevance to the negotiating process, and put the onus for obstructing an Israeli withdrawal on Moscow and Damascus. The Soviets probably are concerned that the accord will breed further negotiations and have a positive effect on the broader Reagan peace plan. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Tactics

3. Moscow's principal means of affecting events in Lebanon has been to extend military aid to Syria. The deployment of Soviet-manned SA-5 and related air defense missile systems and the increased Soviet military presence have bolstered Syria's military posture vis-a-vis Israel and served as a tangible response to the US military presence in Lebanon. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] as a result of Soviet assistance, Damascus has greater confidence in its ability to deal with the Israelis and a lower assessment of the danger involved in rising tensions. This may have reinforced its determination to reject any arrangement which allows for an Israeli security role in southern Lebanon without acknowledging Syria's special status in Lebanon. [REDACTED]

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4. Moscow has joined Damascus in efforts to pressure the Lebanese government. [REDACTED]

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5. The Soviets also have tried to fan tensions in Lebanon to demonstrate that the US-backed withdrawal agreement cannot lead to peace. In the past four months, official Soviet government statements and media commentators have pushed the line that Israel was planning an attack and that hostilities were imminent.

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[REDACTED]

6. Both the Soviets and Syrians may believe they would benefit from limited conflict confined to Lebanon--such as stepped-up artillery exchanges and Palestinian raids on Israeli positions. Such a conflict would undermine the withdrawal agreement and force recognition of Moscow's claims that it must be included if any settlement is to prove viable.

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[REDACTED] Damascus believes a war of attrition undermines Israel's willingness to maintain its forces in Lebanon and may produce either an Israeli withdrawal or an attack--which the Syrians now feel more capable of confronting.

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[REDACTED] Soviet Ambassador to Lebanon Soldatov [REDACTED] left Moscow's commitment to support Syria in a war in Lebanon unclear in a press conference in May. And Soviet official statements have failed to pledge explicit support for Damascus in a broader conflict. Nonetheless, Syria's hope of Soviet backing could prompt it to take provocative action.

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Military and Political Risks

7. Such a campaign clearly carries risks; it can produce an

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escalation of rhetoric and lead to incidents which produce broader conflict (as in Soviet war scares prior to the June 1967 war). Confining military clashes to Lebanon would be very difficult, particularly in view of the two Soviet-manned SA-5 surface-to-air missile sites in Syria and the unpredictability of Israeli responses to their use. Should Israel attack Syrian positions in the Bekaa, for example, the Soviets would face strong Syrian pressure to fire on Israeli planes with SA-5s. The firing of the missiles probably would provoke an Israeli attack on the Soviet sites which in turn could spark a major conflict between Israel and Syria. Such a war almost certainly would lead to Syria's defeat, involve casualties by Soviet units, inflict a further setback to the reputation of Soviet arms, and once again demonstrate Moscow's inability to defend its clients from Israeli attack. To forestall these consequences, Moscow might consider dispatching additional military forces to Syria, thereby running the risk of a clash with Israel and confrontation with the US.

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8. Although the Soviets may not share our assessment of the likelihood of Syria's defeat, we believe that they are impressed with Israel's military capabilities and unlikely to encourage Syria or the Palestinians to initiate or invite a major military conflict. At the same time, there is little indication that the Soviets are exercising a significant restraining influence on their clients. Moscow probably is willing to run the risk of conflict because of Syria's importance to it and because it sees the implementation of a US-arranged withdrawal agreement as a serious blow to its already weak position in the region. The Soviets may be betting on the US ability to restrain Israel, Israel's reluctance to engage Soviet units, and Assad's desire to avoid an all-out war.

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9. Playing a spoiler's role in the peace process also entails political risks. Because of the recent Israeli-Lebanese agreement, the Soviets are again isolated with the extremist Arabs and, with Syria, may be perceived as the recalcitrant and destabilizing actors in the region. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia have expressed support for the withdrawal agreement, and even Iraq has offered low-key approval.

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10. In response, the Soviets have made several gestures designed to project an image of responsibility. A Soviet embassy official in Amman told a US official on 15 May that the Soviets would not object to a Lebanese-Syrian agreement on withdrawal and that Moscow was urging restraint on the Syrians.

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11. Moscow's greatest worry appears to be that Syria, for its own reasons, will be co-opted by a combination of US political machinations and Saudi largesse. [redacted]

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[redacted] a Soviet foreign ministry official complained in May that Moscow was not being informed about Syrian conditions for a withdrawal from Lebanon. Moscow's memories of its exclusion from the US-sponsored Syrian-Israeli disengagement in 1974 probably add to its apprehension in this regard. [redacted]

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Prospective Soviet Moves

12. The Soviets almost certainly will try to bolster Syrian resistance to any efforts by the United States or the moderate Arab states to pull Damascus into the negotiating process. They will maintain a generous flow of military equipment and may organize and supervise further Syrian exercises (such as that held in late May) in an effort to enhance Syrian military proficiency, demonstrate their own support, and reinforce Syrian opposition to the agreement. Such activities will keep tensions in Lebanon high, but Moscow is unlikely to try to precipitate a major Syrian-Israeli military clash. [redacted]

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13. Moscow is also likely to continue to cultivate leftists, Islamic nationalists, and radical Palestinians in Lebanon in order to encourage their opposition to the agreement as well as to prevent the US-supported government from consolidating its hold. This is likely to involve political, propaganda and financial support as well as the filtering of arms to them via Syria. These Soviet actions may well embolden such elements to undertake small scale military actions directed at Israeli and US personnel. [redacted]

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14. Moscow could offer alternate peace proposals designed to put it in a more positive position, derail the US-arranged agreement, and move withdrawal talks into a different forum. This would become a stronger possibility if Syria were to show signs of receptivity to US and moderate Arab efforts. [redacted]

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[redacted] Soviet officials in Beirut indicated in April that the UN would be an appropriate forum for dealing with the withdrawal issue; Moscow might well pursue this tack. The Soviets could resurrect old approaches to Middle East talks--such as the Four Power approach of the late 1960s which followed the

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failure of the Jarring mission--in an effort to appeal to European and moderate Arab audiences. The current support given the Lebanon agreement by most Arab nations makes it unlikely that any such initiatives would succeed in the foreseeable future, however. [REDACTED]

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15. Should Syria show signs of cooperating in pursuing a withdrawal from Lebanon, Moscow might try to use its substantial leverage with Damascus to discourage such a course. The Soviets could threaten to withhold military assistance, advisers or spare parts--or even Soviet-controlled components from the Syrian air defense network. Such extreme actions would be a last resort, however, because Moscow would risk antagonizing Damascus, thereby undermining relations with its key ally in the Arab-Israeli context. [REDACTED]

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16. We believe that Moscow could not prevent the Syrians from concluding an agreement with the US. As Egypt demonstrated in the early 1970s, once a nation has decided on the peace process, Soviet influence based on military aid decreases, particularly if US assistance is forthcoming. Thus, Moscow eventually would have to acquiesce, albeit reluctantly, to such a Syrian policy. [REDACTED]

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IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REAGAN PEACE PLAN

A Broader Middle East Peace

17. Should Syria be pulled into the negotiating process and should the US-arranged withdrawal plan in Lebanon be implemented, the broader Reagan peace initiative would be bolstered and Soviet efforts to play a leading role in peace negotiations undermined. Although Soviet interests in the Middle East have been served by conflict, Moscow has long sought participation in peace negotiations in order to avoid leaving the field to the US, to enhance its status, and to institutionalize its role in the region. [REDACTED]

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18. Since 1979, Moscow has consistently called for an international conference to discuss a comprehensive peace plan for the Middle East and has said that it must include all interested parties, including the PLO. Soviet officials have indicated privately that they envision a peace conference similar to the 1973 Geneva Conference, under the co-chairmanship of the USSR and the United States. Moscow would prefer that the United Nations not be involved in negotiations because this would diminish its own role and include the Chinese. The Soviets have acknowledged in public, however, the UN's "useful" role in the

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peace process, presumably because Arab proposals typically call for UN involvement. [redacted]

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19. Soviet officials have stressed that they must be involved from the opening stages of the negotiating process and not simply invited to sign a document already agreed to by other parties. They have indicated their willingness to be a guarantor of such an agreement and reportedly favor some permanent machinery to monitor it; their own participation in such monitoring would formalize their role in the region. [redacted]

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20. In a September 1982 speech, Soviet President Brezhnev repackaged his long-standing proposals for a Middle East settlement* and incorporated some of the points made at the Fez summit meeting in September, thereby toughening the Soviet position;** the object presumably was to convince the moderate Arabs that the Soviet proposal, unlike that of the US, was compatible with their own and that Moscow should be included in the negotiating process. [redacted]

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21. In seeking inclusion in the peace process, Moscow presumably does not want to appear obstructionist and would prefer to have the onus for the failure of talks fall on Israel and the US. The Soviets therefore are unlikely to urge their allies to take uncompromising positions. In fact, in the past, Moscow has demonstrated flexibility on both the structure of a peace conference and the substance of a settlement--and has encouraged its allies to alter their positions in order to move negotiations forward. [redacted]

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*The basic Soviet position with respect to a settlement calls for:

- The withdrawal of Israeli forces from all territories occupied since 1967.
- The creation of a Palestinian state.
- The guaranteed security and sovereignty of all states in the region, including Israel. [redacted]

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**Brezhnev declared that eastern Jerusalem must become part of a Palestinian state, Moscow's firmest position on that issue to date. [redacted]

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22. Despite a posture toward a settlement which is broadly consistent with that of the moderate Arabs and appears to be positive, the Soviets historically have had little constructive to offer the peace process. They have no leverage with Israel, and both Israel and the United States oppose their participation in negotiations; and they have no capability to arrange peace talks on their own. While conveying the impression of flexibility on both precedural and substantive matters, they have in fact avoided getting out in front of their radical clients or exerting significant leverage in pushing for concessions. Because their major gains have resulted from tensions, the Soviets have no compelling reason to pay a price for real movement toward peace. [REDACTED]

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23. Over the long term, the Soviets may well anticipate that if an international conference does convene, the prospects of its succeeding will remain highly questionable and its failure would work to Soviet advantage. They may reason that the United States could then be made to bear the principal onus for failing to deliver an Israel flexible enough to meet minimum Arab demands. And they may calculate that, in this case, US prestige throughout the Arab world would decline and that opportunities for an improvement in the Soviet position in the region would increase. [REDACTED]

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24. In spite of Moscow's inability to move negotiations forward, various moderate Arabs have endorsed the Soviet proposals, and Jordan's King Husayn has restated his vague support for a future Soviet role in the peace process. While such gestures typically have intensified when the moderates are dissatisfied with US policy and wish to put pressure on Washington, the Arabs may well be impressed by Moscow's determination to block action to which it is not a party. [REDACTED]

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25. Similarly, Egypt's apparent willingness to resume relations with the USSR at the ambassadorial level, Jordan's purchases of arms from the USSR, and Saudi Arabia's hints that it might consider relations with Moscow probably are largely designed to signal displeasure with US policies. But they may also reflect a perception that some accommodation to the USSR is necessary. The Soviets will seek to prevent differences over Lebanon from obstructing their ongoing efforts with the moderates who, for the most part, support the Lebanese-Israeli withdrawal agreement. [REDACTED]

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26. In general, Moscow's ability to achieve its objectives in the Middle East will continue to be based less on its own actions and capabilities than on the creativity of US diplomacy, Israeli actions, and Arab perceptions about the utility of military pressure versus the peace process. The USSR's key ally, Syria, remains the ultimate spoiler, but Moscow has no guarantee that Damascus will not change course. Moscow will continue seeking openings to exploit Arab disillusionment with lack of progress or with US inability to affect Israeli intransigence--but cannot itself obstruct the peace process if the key players want to move forward. [REDACTED]

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